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Restaurant News

THE NEWSWEEKLY OF THE FOODSERVICE INDUSTRY

SECOND CLASS

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'Tis the season to be belt-tightening

Restaurants, caterers try to romance Scrooge consumers for holiday business

by Jack Hayes

A Grinch called recession is trying to steal Christmas from the nation's foodservice operators.

But rather than merely hope for miracles, restaurateurs and caterers from Miami to Seattle are working like Salvation Army Santa Clauses — boosting banquet staffs, widening party services and even freezing last year's prices — to put a little more joy into an otherwise-dismal holiday business season.

And retail-based operators who normally feed the December surge of street and mall shoppers are promoting midweek beverage and appetizer specials to spice traffic at a time when sales are supposed to be booming on their own.

"It's not as if the bottom dropped out, but business took a slow creep d..n in the last quarter," said Craig Weichmann, an analyst with Memphis, Tenn.-based Morgan Keegan.

Weichmann, who tracks retail as well as foodservice, said conservative holiday crowds haven't been a big help to operators on the eve of Christmas. The 120-unit Ruby Tuesday chain, owned by Morrison Inc., has been struggling with flat sales across its mall-based system all quarter long, he reported.

As a result, restaurateurs are turning aggressive.

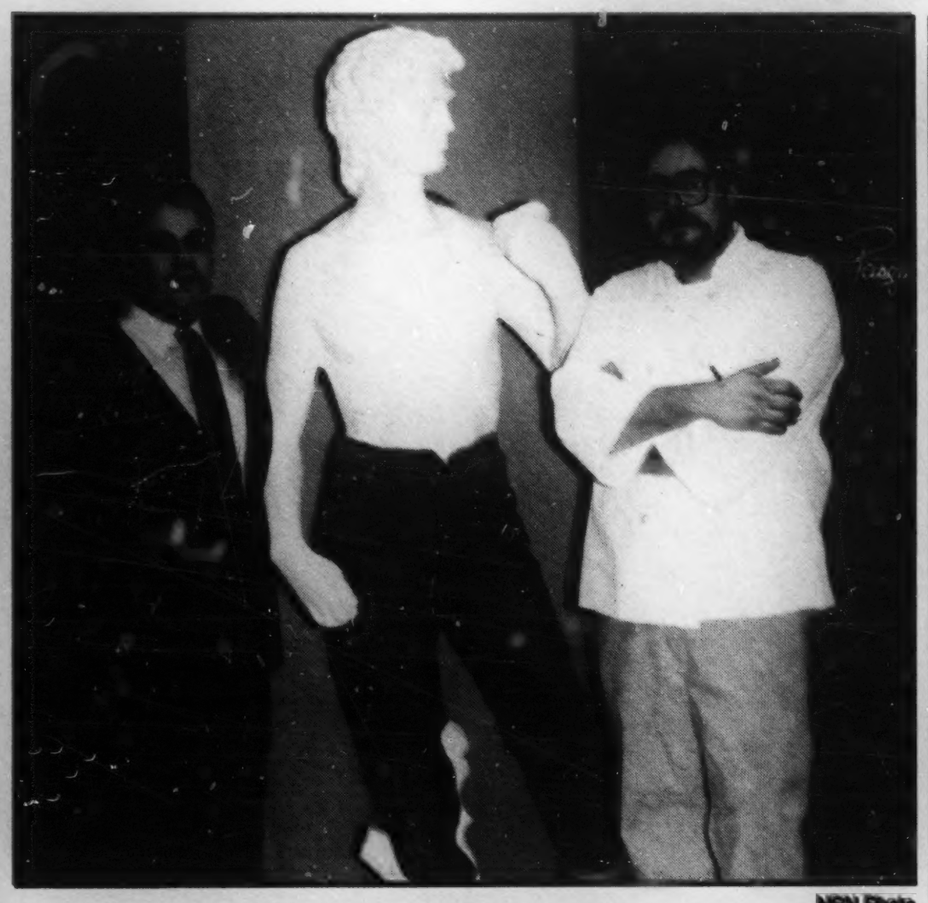
"The midweek mall crowds were disappointing after Thanksgiving," said Ken Merkel, general manager at Ruby Tuesday's Town Center store in Kennesaw, Ga. "We were down 7 to 8 percent through the end of November, so we began doing specials to bring up the numbers."

Corporate party budgets cut

But mall shoppers aren't the only Scrooges that operators have to face this holiday season.

Business managers in tiny offices across the country and

(See *HOLIDAY*, page 4)



NRN Photo

Marty Ferraro, left, general manager of Charley & Pasquale's, and Richard Hall, chef, flank the blue-jean-clad statue of David.

Charley & Pasquale's: Italian-American with sense of humor

by Carolyn Walkup

CHICAGO — Like the rest of the country, Chicago can't seem to get its fill of new Italian restaurants. Now the owners of a brand-new one, Charley & Pasquale's, have added a twist — combining the best of both Italy and America.

Diners get their first hint of the concept at the entrance, which is flanked by a replica of the famous Florentine statue of David, who is wearing a pair of jeans instead of nothing at all. Some clever interior artwork extends the theme by combining the Roman Coliseum with Comiskey Park, home of the Chicago White Sox, and by juxtaposing a Venetian gondolier with the Chicago skyline.

The menu is divided into Charley's choices and Pasquale's choices. The fictional Charley prefers gumbo while Pasquale likes minestrone; Charley touts barbecued ribs and steaks, but Pasquale likes eggplant Parmigiana and a Sicilian-style veal chop.

"Italian and American food

(See *CHARLEY*, page 56)

Wyatt tests Blue Ribbon all-you-can-eat concept

by Tracey Woodard

HOUSTON — Wyatt Cafeterias Inc. has added the Blue Ribbon Buffet, an all-you-can-eat, self-service restaurant, to its growing number of scaled-down, hybrid concepts.

Built in an existing Wyatt Cafeteria unit located here, the Blue Ribbon Buffet — a 250-seat operation with self-serve food stations and home-style food — joins Mrs. Wyatt's and Wyatt's Express as the company seeks new ways to continue expansion under a heavy debt load.

"We're a highly leveraged company," said Mark Shackelford, the new president of Wyatt. "It's difficult to find the capital to build a $2.5 million cafeteria. So we're trying to invest in areas where we can increase idle capacities."

The concept represents a lower expenditure for Wyatt because the kitchen is much smaller than that of a Wyatt's Cafeteria and the company plans to convert existing restaurant buildings, including underperforming Wyatt units, rather than building from scratch.

Plans call for the new units to be roughly the same size as an average Wyatt's Cafeteria. But the Blue Ribbon differs from the cafeteria in that there are about two-thirds fewer menu items and customers serve themselves at various islands placed just beyond the

(See *WYATT*, page 57)

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Popeyes-Church's lesson
Charles Bernstein/Page 23

Are Italian dinner houses recession proof?
Focus/Page 29

Westin increases pour; moves to premium well
Hochstein/Page 42

Pasta Fresca: The next best thing to homemade?

by Peter O. Keegan

SHREWSBURY, N.J. — Pasta Fresca, a retail operation that sells homemade ready-to-cook pasta, has premiered offering health- and price-conscious consumers a new alternative to pasta at restaurants, take-out operations and supermarkets.

"You can come in and pick up some fresh pasta, your choice of sauce and some bread," said co-owner Michael Aufiero, who owns and franchises a trattoria concept in central New Jersey. "All you have to do is go home and boil the water."

On a daily basis Pasta Fresca — which means "fresh pasta" in Italian — features a dozen types of plain and infused pastas, eight to 10 kinds of homemade ravioli, two to five sauces and a half-dozen freshly baked breads. The prototype unit also offers a line of imported hard cheeses, signature oils and vinegars, herbs and spices and proprietary bottled water.

After 10 years in the industry, Aufiero wanted to free himself from the service end of the

(See *PASTA*, page 56)

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NEWS BRIEFS

USDA predicts slight slowdown in food-price inflation for '91

WASHINGTON — The U.S. Department of Agriculture forecasted a 2 percent to 5 percent rise in consumer food prices for 1991, compared with the 6 percent projection for 1990.

The U.S.D.A. cited record meat supplies, higher dairy output and the probability of larger citrus crops as reasons for the moderation in food price inflation.

James R. Donald, chairman of the U.S.D.A.'s World Agricultural Outlook Board, added that food marketing costs will rise at a slower rate if overall inflation eases to a level of 4.5 percent.

Rally's names Sugarman CEO, Albritton president

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — Rally's Inc. has elected Hollywood producer Burt Sugarman as chief executive and Wayne Albritton as president and chief operating officer.

Sugarman, chairman of the company's largest shareholder and head of the executive committee, and Albritton, one of the 255-unit double drive-thru chain's founders, assume posts relinquished by Richard Sherman, who remains chairman. Sugarman, chairman of Beverly Hills, Calif.-based Giant Group Ltd., won control of Rally's following a bitter shareholder struggle last year.

Sherman, who has been at Rally's helm for more than three years, said he requested the changes so he could spend more time with his family and with other personal interests.

Albritton now will be responsible for day-to-day operations while Sugarman, who will remain in California, and Sherman will assist the management team in "our various areas of expertise," Sherman said.

The company also named Jack Roschman, founder of the Ponderosa steak-house chain and father of Snapps Drive-Thru founders Jeffrey Roschman and Robert Roschman, to the Rally's board. Rally's recently agreed to purchase the Snapps chain over a period of time and signed the Roschman brothers to a Rally's franchise development pact.

S&A shutters regional offices

DALLAS — S&A Restaurant Corp., operators of the Steak & Ale and Bennigan's restaurant chains, will close nine regional offices in a move designed to force field managers to become more attuned to customers by putting their offices in restaurants.

"This has nothing to do with the economy or sales," said Peter Williams, human resources vice president. "We want the regionals to be focused on the guests in the restaurant and before they were just distracted, having to maintain an office and a secretary. We want the regionals in the restaurant now."

Williams said about 20 employees will be affected by the closings. Some will be offered other jobs in the company.

New MCA owner to spin off Yosemite Concessions

by Alan Liddle

YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK, Calif. — Matsushita Industrial Electric Co., the giant Japanese conglomerate that recently agreed to buy MCA Inc. of Universal City, Calif., said it will sell MCA's controversial Yosemite Park & Curry Co. concessions subsidiary to an American buyer within a year.

Matsushita and MCA officials said they decided to sell the concessions company "to be responsive to environmental and other concerns which have been raised."

Pending a sale, which it expects to complete within 12 months, Matsushita said it will put the concessionaire's stock in escrow and donate all its profits to the National Park Foundation. Neither Matsushita nor MCA officials were available for comment about how much might be donated to the fund, but the Los Angeles Times quoted one high-ranking National Park Service official as describing the concessionaire's annual profits as "multiple millions [of dollars]."

Matsushita and MCA had been urged to sell the concessions company to an American group by National Park Service officials and others who didn't want the concessions contract for a national park to fall into foreign hands.

Environmentalists have complained for some time that the park is overdeveloped with commercial enterprises, which they say are directly and indirectly damaging Yosemite's environment. They have also objected to what they characterize as a "sweetheart" deal between the National Park Service and the Yosemite Park & Curry Co., which pays the government a fee of three-fourths of 1 percent of its gross revenues.

The Yosemite Restoration Trust, which has been critical of the park's concessions arrangement, has indicated that it will be among the bidders for the concessions company.

Among other things, Yosemite Park & Curry Co. operates two cafeterias, three full-service restaurants, assorted deli and fast-food outlets, 12 lodging facilities, including the world-famous Awahnee Hotel and Yosemite Lodge, the Badger Pass ski area, 22 gift and specialty shops and a number of tour groups.

Matsushita, which reported worldwide revenues of $37.8 billion for the year ended in March, late last month agreed to pay MCA shareholders $6.13 billion in cash and give them stock in an MCA subsidiary that owns a television station.

In addition to the Yosemite concessions company, MCA also owns Universal Pictures, Universal Studios in Universal City and its sister theme park in Florida. MCA is also active in the music and publishing industries.

Atlanta Shoney's franchisee sued for discrimination

ATLANTA — Atlanta Family Restaurants, a 47-unit Shoney's franchisee, has been hit with a federal discrimination suit alleging the operation does not hire blacks for dining room positions, denies them promotions and secretly codes job applications to identify minorities.

The suit was filed in the U.S. District Court in Atlanta by Nancy Hamp, who charges that she was denied a waitress position because she was black. It charges Atlanta Family Restaurants as having "a continuing racist policy in recruiting and hiring blacks."

Attorneys for Atlanta Family Restaurants declined to comment on the case.

The plaintiff's attorney claims to have affidavits from former Shoney's supervisors who were told by management that the dining room was "too dark."

The action is the latest in a series of discrimination charges to be leveled at the Nashville, Tenn.-based chain. Last year, Shoney's Inc. signed a $90 million affirmative action pact.

Acapulco names Larner VP, CFO

LONG BEACH, Calif. — Acapulco Restaurants has hired John Larner, a six-year veteran of Taco Bell, to be the California chain's vice president and chief financial officer.

His arrival at the 50-unit Mexican dinner-house operator follows the appointment of its president, Philip Ratner, as executive vice president of West Coast operations for Acapulco's New York-based parent company, Restaurant Associates, a Kyotaru Co. subsidiary.

Larner, Taco Bell's former senior operations-services director, also was accounting director there and at Burger Chef. Immediately before joining Acapulco he was the controller of Knott's Berry Farm, a Buena Park, Calif., theme park. He succeeds Acapulco's former finance vice president, Leonard Dryer, who joined the Marie Callender's chain five months ago.

FOOD

Restaurateurs still have a 'steak' in beef lovers

Despite concerns about fat and cholesterol, the operation that does not have a steak on its menu remains, shall we say, rare. Even the new Lexington Avenue Grill in New York's Summit Hotel, meant to be a place for seafood, has a 16-ounce steak for carnivores in the audience.

But increasingly, except in classic steak houses, it's not just a plain, thick New York cut like that. It's being featured with stylish additions. Vegetable garnishes of all sorts, including the classic frites, are being served. Flavored butters still adorn some steaks, especially outside New York, but assorted vinaigrettes are beginning to show up more and more.

In New York the "hanger steak" is suddenly popular. This is the fibrous but tasty cut, one to a steer, that the butchers are supposed to have saved for themselves. Butcher's tender or butcher's tenderloin is another name for it. In French it's *onglet*, a popular bistro item.

The hanger steak is served at Chez Louis and at the new Chef's and Cuisinier's Club, among others. It takes some getting used to, but as long as the price can be kept moderate, it is likely to acquire a following. On the other hand, if popularity creates a shortage, driving the price up, it may fade as a fad.

The other darling of the bistro, the tasty but sometimes fatty *entrecote*, is done with particular care with a garnish of marrow at the Sign of the Dove in New York, where a new à la carte menu is in effect. American Bistro in King's Park, N.Y., has a grilled rib steak with green peppercorn sauce.

At the Palm Grill in Key West the main courses

range from a pizza to grilled prime rib, a rib steak, with mushrooms. Those operations are among few that actually deliver the rib-eye cut. For example, at the now defunct 1022 the promised entrecote was the basic boneless shell steak.

Bistro-style steak-pommes-frites prepared with the more familiar New York cut is served at Ma Maison in Los Angeles for lunch, Jacqui's, formerly Jacqueline's, and at Quartorze in New York.

The Spanish Eldorado Petit has filet steak with garlic and sirloin with wild mushrooms, two of four meat dishes. The Black Angus shell steak at the Union Square Cafe in New York is smoked before it is grilled.

Michael's Waterside in Santa Barbara, Calif., serves stake with smoky bacon and mushrooms and also offers filet of beef with Roquefort and morels on a list of only seven main dishes. Devil Mountain Brewery Restaurant in Walnut Creek, Calif., presents its New York cut sirloin with "Devil Mt." brew butter.

Tourelle in Lafayette, Calif., plays it straight with a grilled New York sirloin with bordelaise butter, and Ernie's in San Francisco offers a garlic vinaigrette and assorted fried vegetables. At Bistro in Bedford Village, N.Y., New York's classic pepper steak is made with the shell, as is the 8-ounce steak served with a jalapeño bearnaise at Backstreet Cafe in Houston.

Steak comes with Zinfandel and a roasted shallot sauce at Cafe Provençal in Evanston, Ill. At Carlucci in Chicago the grilled porterhouse steak becomes a "bistecca alla fiorentina" with rosemary and sage. The Swiss Grand's new Land of Plenty operation in Chicago serves a Delmonico cut of Brae Beef with root vegetable chips.

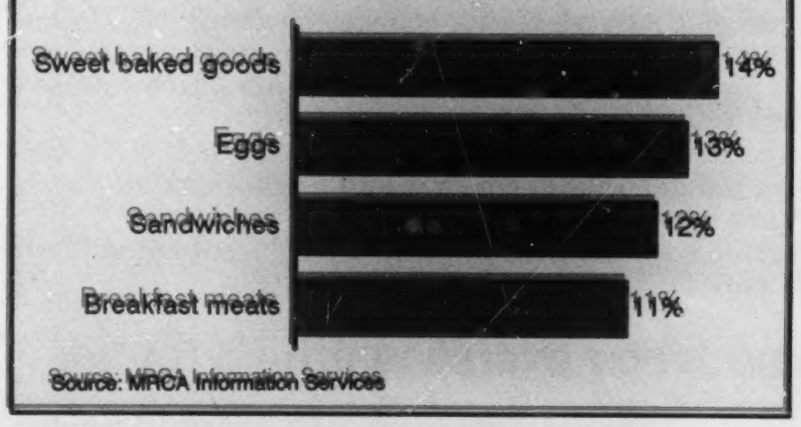
Grilled tenderloin is another popular option. At the Trellis in Williamsburg, Va., it is complemented with crispy potatoes and the chef's steak sauce. Square One in San Francisco does it with a sauce of Armagnac, raisins and black pepper. Occasionally this operation features flank steak with an avocado salsa.

Filet of beef is dressed with new Mexico red chilies and roasted garlic cream at Robert Del Grande's Cafe Annie in Houston. Melange in Chicago has a filet with fried onions and vegetable sauce.

At Gaia Cafe in New York's Greenwich Village, it comes with a tarragon sauce, and at the Hudson River Club in downtown Manhattan it's served in an artichoke with a shallot and balsamic vinegar reduction. The grilled filet steak is served with artichokes and tarragon at the American Restaurant in Kansas City. Even at Restaurant Lafayette, Jean Georges Vongerichten includes beef tenderloin filled with marrow and served with chick pea fries and chive oil on the new fall menu.

FOOD NEWS DIGEST

What's for breakfast?



Sweet baked goods top away-from-home breakfast list

STAMFORD, Conn. — Sweet baked goods top the list of breakfast foods eaten away from home, according to a survey conducted by MRCA Information Services, based here.

Baked items, such as doughnuts, sweet rolls and pastries, accounted for 14 percent of all breakfast foods eaten out. Eggs — with a 13 percent share — were the next most popular foods, while sandwiches and breakfast meats came in third and fourth, at 12 percent and 11 percent, respectively.

By comparison, the top foods consumed at home were ready-to-eat cereal (22 percent), loaf bread (19 percent), eggs (10 percent) and fruit (10 percent).

It's not surprising that coffee, with a 55-percent share, is the favorite breakfast beverage consumed away from home. Juice is next, at 19 percent.

Rosemarie's struts its stuff at James Beard House luncheon

NEW YORK — Chef James Bergin of Rosemarie's in Manhattan executed his culinary skills at the James Beard House here as part of an ongoing Italian luncheon series.

The lunch began with hors d'oeuvres of Parmesan shortbreads with sun-dried tomatoes and *crab bignes*. To warm up the guests, Bergin created a butternut squash soup with Gorgonzola cheese and walnuts, followed by cavatelli with broccoli and pancetta.

The luncheon's featured entrée was roasted tuna with Sicilian couscous, and a dessert of pear poached in wine and saffron polenta cake with pistachios rounded out the meal.

Eddie's offers new menu items, complete with scissors

PHOENIX — Eddie Matney and Larry Cohn, owners of Eddie's Grill here, has rolled out two new menu items, including one that comes with a pair of scissors to keep.

When patrons order the baked onion soup, they receive a pair of brightly colored miniature scissors to snip the Mozzarella.

The "soup-n-scissors" package costs $3.95 at lunch and dinner.

Also added to the menu is the pastrami and Bass Ale sandwich, which features thin slices of ale-marinated pastrami on toasted rye with a shot of Bass for "dipping or sipping." The sandwich costs $7.95 at lunch and dinner and comes with homemade potato chips and coleslaw.

The restaurant, renamed and redefined in September, was formerly known as KousKooz. The menu features a variety of "Ameriterranean" and American dishes.

Anderson unveils Scandinavian holiday menu at Midland hotel

CHICAGO — The Midland Hotel's new executive chef, Eric Andersen, is adding Scandinavian specialties to the predominantly American menu at the hotel's Exchange Restaurant.

Among the specials are mussel soup with saffron, salmon Gustaf, Norwegian gravlax, Danish seafood soup, Scandinavian oysters, sweet potato pancakes, Scandinavian scallop potatoes and Norwegian raspberry parfait.

"Scandinavian cooking is basically a light cuisine, high in protein and low in fat, and fits exceptionally well into the current emphasis on 'healthy' eating," Andersen says.

China Grill rolls out casual dim sum brunch

NEW YORK — China Grill, the 3-year-old East-West fusion restaurant in the CBS headquarters here, has introduced a dim sum brunch.

Guests will choose from items placed on a cart that is rolled through the dining room.

The selection, developed by chef Peter Klein, includes Napa vegetable rolls, tempura goat cheese, Szechuan chips, grilled beef satay, steamed barbecue buns, pan-fried Chinese dumplings, spicy shrimp with sesame citrus noodles, barbecued salmon with Chinese mustard, stir-fried duck with steamed pancakes and Szechuan sliced beef.

All dishes are priced at either $4, $6 or $8.

WHAT'S HOT IN

ORANGE COUNTY, CALIF.

Amici Trattoria

3220 Park Center Drive, Costa Mesa, (714) 850-9399. Seats: 75 plus 50-seat patio. Cuisine: Italian. Specialties: mixed grill of fish and vegetables; osso buco; linguine with seafood. Entree price range: $9.95-$16. Chef-owner: Massimo Navarretta.

Bistro 201

18201 Von Karman Ave., Irvine, (714) 553-9201. Seats: 225. Cuisine: eclectic. Specialties: warm duck liver flan with sour cherry confit and walnut toast; rosemary roasted seabass with mashed potatoes and fennel slaw. Entree price range: $12.95-$18.50. Owner: David Wilhelm. Chef: John Sharpe.

Cafe Zoolu

860 Glenneyre St., Laguna Beach, (714) 494-6825. Seats: 33. Cuisine: eclectic, healthful. Specialties: cioppino with Vietnamese *nuocmam* fish sauce; Thai stir-fried chicken with garlic and lemon grass. Entree price range: $7-$14. Owners: Jeri Kissler-Painter, Lonnie Painter. Chef: Lonnie Painter.

The Rex

1141 Newport Center Drive, Newport Beach, (714) 644-4400. Seats: 165. Cuisine: seafood. Specialties: carpaccio of salmon, ahi and swordfish; foie gras in a daikon-Port sauce; sauteed abalone and pasta with wild mushrooms; sauteed baby opakapaka. Entree price range: $20-$45. Owner: Rex Chandler. Chef: Eugenio Martignano.

Zeppa

327 Newport Center Drive, Newport Beach, (714) 640-0600. Seats: 92 plus 58-seat patio. Cuisine: contemporary Northern Italian. Specialties: duck confit salad; garlic gnocchi. Entree price range: $10-$22. Owners: Rick Harmon, Barry Hermanson, Mark Zigner. Chef: Craig Connole.

Compiled by Richard Martin